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ABSTRACT

This study identified how mothering knowledge influenced students' development in becoming teachers and explored how becoming a student and prospective teacher affected students' perspectives as parents. Participants were preservice teachers who were also mothers. All participants were undergraduate and graduate students in a New Jersey teacher education program. Each student completed an interview (or a questionnaire for those unable to be interviewed) based on questions developed following discussions with mother/students about issues that they faced. The interview addressed such areas as demographics, reasons for becoming a teacher, difficulties in mothering, mothering characteristics that influence teaching, the influence of preservice teacher education on mothering, and advantages or disadvantages of being an older student. Results indicated that for most women, being a mother was the catalyst for becoming a teacher. Students believed that they would be flexible, patient, empathetic, and sensitive to children because of their mothering experience, and that they would be more realistic in terms of giving assignments knowing how long they can take. They believed they would have a more realistic understanding of the social and familial pressures pupils face. Overall, participants were enthusiastic about being in school at this time in their lives, with the advantages outweighing the disadvantages. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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When Mothers Become Teachers:

Effects of the Mothering Experience on Prospective Teachers

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When Mothers Become Teachers: effects of the mothering experience on prospective teachers

Introduction/Rationale

Most teachers (72 per cent) are also parents, and the relationship between the two roles has interested educators at various levels of schooling (see Grumet, 1988; Hulsebosch, 1990; Keplar-Zumwalt, 1986; MacDonald, 1994; Peterson, 1997). Although there is some research on the effects of the dual role, there has been little inquiry into how being a parent affects one's development in becoming a teacher. I owe my interest in this issue to students who in formal and informal ways -through papers and logs, and in conversations with me - have said that being a parent influences them as they explore teaching and learning issues.

When teachers begin their careers, most, or about 80 per cent, do not have children (Newman, 1994). In recent years, however, an increasing number of women with children have returned to school for the purpose of becoming teachers. As a teacher of courses which prepare students to teach, I have become aware that students who are mothers bring a particular perspective to the role of becoming a teacher.

The purposes of this study are (1) to identify how mothering knowledge influences students' development in becoming teachers and (2) to explore how being a student and

prospective teacher affects one's perspective as a parent.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

There are three areas of research which have influenced this study. As I have indicated, the relationship between teaching and parenting has been explored by educators with differing perspectives and at different levels of inquiry. Kepler-Zumwalt (1986) noted the similarities and differences in being a beginning teacher and a new mother. The positive effects of being a teacher- parent have been reported by Hulsebosch (1990), Lightfoot (1978), and MacDonald (1994) while negative effects are described by Katz (1980), Nias (1989), and Spencer (1986). Grumet (1988) went so far as to compare the privacy of the classroom to the "exile of domesticity".

In their study, Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) claimed "mothering...has at its center the teaching of the next generation... and we were interested in how maternal practice might shape women's thinking about human development and the teaching relationship" (p.13).

Ruddick 's term "maternal despair" (1989) refers to the isolation and self doubt mothers can feel, acknowledging the difficulties in motherhood women often have been reluctant to express.

Much has been written about midlife changes vis a vis work and perspectives on life (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983:

Friedan, 1997; Hochschild, 1997). Apter's (1998) thesis that women experience a renewed sense of themselves in their forties and fifties was relevant to this study since the participants in this study were in that age range and, like Apter, viewed those years as an opportunity for change and growth.

The research approach of Neumann and Peterson (1997) was an especially valuable model in examining the effects of mothering on becoming a teacher. Their concept of research as "a personal experience" (p.3) also combines the personal and professional aspects of women's lives. In addition, I found it affirming to read in Bateson's introduction: "One of the questions that is often asked about research of this kind is whether the voices we hear are representative. This is a false question, since they offer a range of possibility, not a statistical sample" (p.viii). The student-mothers in this study offer a range of perspectives on how being mothers affects their development in becoming teachers.

Data Source

Student/mothers were undergraduate and graduate students in my courses in the teacher education program at a public university in New Jersey. I "found" participants for this study when students made comments in class discussions which related to their mothering experience. After class I would ask the students if they might be interested in participating in a study on the subject of mothers who want to be teachers. I did not announce to my students that I was studying this

issue until a student made a comment about her mothering experience. I then asked if there were other mothers in the class, and usually there were about two or three in a class of twenty. I mention this because in some way I wanted the initiation of the mothering-teaching connection to be made by the students rather than me. I interviewed students after they had completed a course with me (rather than while taking one of my courses). Participants also were drawn from courses taught by my colleagues who informed their students of the study. Thirty students were interviewed. They ranged in age from 37 to 52, and most were between the ages of 41 to 45. Their majors include English, french, history, art, home economics, business education, early childhood, elementary, and special education. Although the students had in common the goal of becoming teachers, there were differences among them in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds and work experiences. Also, and perhaps more importantly, there were differences in how willing and able the women were to be introspective and revealing of their mothering knowledge and perspectives.

I collected names of interested students over a three year time period and interviewed them during a six to twelve month time period.

A nucleus of four students were the initial interviewees. All were married and living with their spouses. Sarah is 41 years old and has two daughters, ages 14 and 10. She had been an optician before becoming a mother and worked at that

job once a week while her children were not yet in school. She had an interest in becoming a teacher while in high school but did not pursue it. She expects to become an English teacher at the middle or high school level.

Jean, age 44, also has two daughters, 7 and 11. She majored in French at a prestigious Eastern women's college and after graduation worked for a year as a governess in France. She also worked in marketing for 10 years. She has had some experience teaching French in before and after-school programs, and the satisfaction she derived from this work led her to pursue a Master of Arts in Teaching.

The third woman, Carmen, 43, married at 19, has three children in middle school and "always wanted to teach". She worked in an insurance company for 11 years and now that her children are in school full time she has returned to college to become an English teacher.

The fourth interviewee, Toni, also married at 19 is 41 and has two daughters, ages 19 and 14. She has been an assistant teacher in a nursery school and "couldn't wait" to get her degree so she can become the actual classroom teacher.

The women did not know each other, and after interviewing them I felt it might be beneficial to the students and useful to the project to share ideas as a group.

I invited the students to my home for lunch during the first summer break. I was aware of an awkwardness at the beginning of this gathering. Suddenly I was professor as well as cook

and "hostess" and the students seemed a bit too polite. But as we ate and talked, the awkwardness evaporated and the students focused on the complexities in being mothers and students. The challenging logistics of the dual role drew the women together (i.e. taking classes, preparing meals, helping with homework, going to back to school nights). As the afternoon ended, I sensed a camaraderie among them and began to think that the teacher education program ought to provide an opportunity for students to share ideas as they did on my porch.

I used the four students as collaborators in thinking about next steps for the project. I developed a questionnaire which I sent to students I did not interview (see Appendix A). It was based on the interview questions as well as the reactions and suggestions from the original four students. They were very cooperative in assessing and commenting on the questionnaire.

Method

I chose interviewing as the main mode of inquiry because I thought it would best capture the students' views of mothering and teaching. The interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions (see Appendix B) but they also included the amplifications and digressions which students made to answer the questions as fully as they wished. I share with Gilligan (1982) the view that "how people talk about their lives is of significance, and the language they use and

connections they make reveal the world they see" (p.2). This approach to interviewing is in the tradition of research interviewing (Mishler, 1986) in which the interviewee may discover meaning and understanding through the actual interview process.

The interviews were conducted in my office and lasted approximately one hour. They were recorded on audiotape and transcribed by me. Since many of the questions were open-ended, they generated a variety of interpretations and responses. I have tried to capture what in distinctive in the women's voice as I looked for common patterns in their comments. Themes emerged from studying the data as in the "grounded theory" tradition of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the research interviewing approach of Mishler (1986).

Results

The questions that yielded the most interesting results concerned the following issues: (1) reasons that led student-mothers to become teachers: (2) beliefs about how their mothering knowledge influences or will influence them as teachers: (3) opinions about what they found hard in mothering: (4) assessment of advantages and disadvantages of being an "older" student.

Reasons for Becoming Teachers

For most of the women being a mother was the catalyst for becoming a teacher. For some, the actual parenting experience led them into teaching.

A prospective special education teacher with three children

said. "I've been so interested in educational issues because of my children." A early childhood teacher said. "It was through the love and devotion that I have for my children and seeing them develop and mature that I became interested in what made them tick."

Being in a school environment as a parent was a factor in deciding to teach. A student who has become an art teacher said. "When my daughter reached elementary school age. I began to volunteer in various programs...I found I enjoyed working with children and that my knowledge of art history. art techniques and my role as a parent could naturally lead to a career as an art teacher."

Teaching in a non-teaching setting triggered the desire to become a teacher. A business education teacher said. "When I was an office manager the thing I liked best about my job was teaching others and helping them learn and advance themselves."

A usual reason for becoming a teacher. interest in the subject matter. was also cited by the students. A 37 year old music major said. "I decided to become a teacher because I have a passion for my subject matter and I enjoy participating in the process of learning."

Influence of Mothering Knowledge

Three themes emerged from an analysis of students' beliefs about how they will use their mothering knowledge in teaching. Affectively. the students believe they will be flexible. patient. empathic and sensitive to children's

feelings as a result of their mothering experience. Secondly, mothers believe they will be more "realistic" in terms of giving assignments-knowing how long they can take and how doable they are. A third theme concerned the realization that children have social and familial obligations that often conflict with school requirements.

Empathy, sensitivity, trust

The music teacher who has daughters aged 7 and 16 said:

> My mothering knowledge has given me an understanding and sensitivity towards my students that I don't think I would have if I were not a mother... I believe my mothering knowledge helps me to better connect with my students. I think this "relationship connection" is more important than anything I could ever teach. I feel that as a mother the persona I put forth may make children more inclined to trust me as well.

A prospective elementary school teacher talked about affirming the worth of each child:

> I think there's a certain sympathy that comes from parenting...when you look at a child, their frailties, and I think you need to always remember that this little ego bruises easily.

Similarly, a prospective English teacher talked about valuing students' efforts:

> I know how proud my kids are of stuff they've done or I've seen them struggle through projects, and just get an A on the top and not even a comment. So I think that recognizing, knowing as a parent the effort and the time that gets set aside to do this ... ... I think all that needs to be recognized and appreciated.

A business education teacher:

> It has made me look past their classroom behavior and look for other things that may be bothering them. Also, I feel I want to "protect" the students from pain or harm or anything negative.

A prospective elementary school teacher with a 10 year old:

> You realize how fragile a child is - the incredible impact of a facial expression or a grade on a paper. I'm tuned in to children who are left out and [having] my son has made me notice these things.

Awareness of parents' perspectives

Empathy included being sensitive to parents. Students believed that parent teacher conferences are important opportunities for serious dialogue and acknowledging a child's worth. Participants felt that they will be more understanding of parents in general because they are parents.

Realistic assignments

Students believe they will be more "realistic" in terms of giving assignments. They claim they will pay attention to the time assignments can take and how doable they actually are.

A prospective french teacher with two daughters talked about knowing the reality of family life and the kinds of assignments that are not realistic for a 7 year old to carry out:

> I can't imagine that the teacher has children of her own and would ask students to do a supermarket assignment that was time consuming and over their heads.

A home economics teacher with two sons. 7 and 10 complained about projects that require parent participation (help).She found these very frustrating. time-consuming and of questionable educational value.

Social and familial obligations

Participants believed that as teachers they will have a more realistic understanding of the social and familial pressures students face.

As an example, a prospective history teacher talked about the tension of having several term papers due at the same time. This parent did not think academic standards would be compromised by an increase in understanding of the pressures in students' lives. The mothers in general expressed the view that their children were much busier and "programmed" than they were as children.

Hard in Mothering Themes

The students responded the question of what they found difficult in parenting in several ways. For most of the women having enough time, energy and patience was the hardest aspect of being a mother. "Not enough hours in a day", "staying organized and having enough time in each day", "having sufficient patience, balancing time between work, school and home" was a common theme. Women also referred to the early years of being a mother and the constancy of being home, not being able to "finish anything...having a colicky baby". One woman in describing the early days as very "rough", quoted Blakely (1994) "motherhood means you love the rest of your life with your heart on your sleeve". One mother referred to the common worry about how effective one is as a parent: "whether the decisions you make about how to guide your children are correct and whether that guidance

will equip them to be responsible adults".

Being an "Older" Student

In general the students were enthusiastic about being in school at this time of their lives. The advantages seemed to far outweigh the disadvantages. All of the women, in various ways, expressed the sentiment that maturity and life experience was very useful in the learning they were currently engaged in.

A 37 year old music teacher said:

> My wisdom as an older person has definitely helped me reach children that I would not have a clue about as a 22 year old.

A 40 year old elementary teacher said:

> I believe that becoming a teacher at this time makes the greatest sense. I know who I am and what I can offer my students.

Having children and returning to school made the prospective French teacher "vitally interested in education...My interest level in some of these courses in much higher because I'm a parent." A special education candidate found returning to school "terrifying at first..it was so long since I wrote a paper". However, the overall experience has been "intellectually enriching and confidence building".

The students identified two negative aspects of being a student at this time in their lives. Their perspectives differed from the younger students who are clearly in the majority. They referred to a lack of seriousness and maturity on the part of the younger students. "Working with people with a typical 18 year old attitude, i.e. they are

here to get through". The student mothers felt a sense of relief when they found other "older" students in their classes who could share their perspectives and experience.

Effects of "Teaching Knowledge" on Mothering

Being a student in the teacher education program had some lesser effects on the women as mothers. Some thought they developed a broadened perspective toward toward their children through learning about the affective and cognitive nature of children. Secondly, they said they "listened better" to their children as a result exposure to the content of teacher education courses. Concepts such as the importance of consistency, setting limits, and establishing routines which they studied as students were relevant and useful to them as mothers. One woman who is teaching said,

> My teaching experience has allowed me to see both sides of the educational fence, so to speak. I feel that it has helped me to understand my children's teachers and their behaviors more clearly.

Conclusion/Implications

While mothering knowledge is germane to teaching, its adapability to teaching depends on the inclination and disposition of the mother to make that connection. Being a parent is one's first teaching assignment, and for the most part it has no preparation. Clearly there are many aspects to the overlapping nature of teaching and parenting, and the student/mothers bring much wisdom to the role of becoming a teacher. What we learn in mothering -patience, flexibility

in teaching. Empathy toward parents and awareness of familial complexities are useful to any new teacher. Student/mothers as teachers are likely to utilize this important kind of knowledge because it is part of what they know as parents.

Older students who want to become teachers have much to bring to our profession and school systems. The dual perspective of parent and teacher can be important in bridging the gap that can exist between parents and teachers.

As a society which tends to value youth, we need to be aware that it can take courage and thoughtfulness to become a teacher at a more advanced stage of life. The students in this study could not have been more convinced that they made the right choice.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire for Parents Who Are Becoming Teachers
or Who Have Recently Become Teachers

PLEASE USE THE BACK OF THE PAPERS TO ELABORATE ON ANY RESPONSES. I AM INTERESTED IN ANY DETAILS YOU WANT TO INCLUDE.

Today's date_____

1. Name_____

2. Age (optional)_____

3. Status in Teacher Education Program (check appropriate categories):

   a. Completed Program _____

   b. Currently Teaching_____

   c. Student Teaching_____

   d. Not yet Student Teaching_____

4. Gender and ages of you children_____

_____

5. (a) Why and when did you decide to become a teacher?

   (b) What subject(s) will you teach?

6. What is hard or hardest for you in mothering?
   (i.e. setting limits, having sufficient patience, having enough time, etc.)
   Was your mother's mothering behavior similar to yours?
   Briefly describe differences.

7. What have you learned as a mother that you think will influence you as you become a teacher? If you are student teaching or teaching, describe how your "mothering knowledge" influences you as a teacher.

8. Has the teacher preparation experience (or student teaching or paid teaching) affected your perspective as a parent? Please describe in any way you choose to.

9. Returning to school as a "older" student is increasingly common. What do you see as the advantages and/or disadvantages of being an "older" student? What do you think are the advantages of being or becoming a teacher at this point in your life?

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Other comments are very welcome!

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule

1. Today's date:

2. Name:

3. Status in Teacher Education Program at this time:

4. Age:

5. Number of children, Ages, Sex:

6. If you worked before "becoming a teacher", what jobs did you have and how did you feel about them?

7. Why are you preparing to become a teacher? What factors or issues led you to this decision?

8. Regarding mothering or being a parent: What is it like for you? What is hard?

9. Your own mother - was she a model for you? Was anyone else a model?

10. Regarding mothering knowledge and experience: What have you learned as a mother that you think will influence you as a teacher? What do you know that you think will be beneficial, useful? In your view, how or where do mothering and teaching overlap?

11. What are your thoughts about being an older student--plusses and minuses in the perspective of a "latecomer" What are the challenges? (issue of multiple roles and coping strategies)